Re-evaluating Education in Japan and Korea: Demystifying Stereotypes by Hyunjoon Park

Review by: Aaron L. Miller

American Journal of Education, Vol. 120, No. 3 (May 2014), pp. 438-441

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/675632

Accessed: 01/05/2014 13:40

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to American Journal of Education.
In recent decades, education scholars, teachers, parents, and politicians around the world have been gazing across the seas to find new educational ideas, policies, pedagogies, and practices. Cross-national attraction, as this phenomenon is called, owes much of its existence and relevance to two international exams that purport to rank the educational output of any given nation: the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS; Phillips and Ochs 2003; Rappleye 2006). Score high on these tests, and you just might find your nation’s education system the envy of the world. Yet these tests pay close attention only to that which can be compared—the apple of one nation with the apple of another, you might say—so it is understandable that they are rather limited in what they can tell us. In fact, they often raise as many questions as they answer.

Enter into this world two nations—Japan and Korea—whose educational output (read: labor force) has impressed on us Anglophones a remarkable image of hard work, discipline, and devotion to the school, team, or firm. Many pages have been written in English about how we in the West can and should mimic the educational policies and practices of these East Asian nations in order to help our economies grow.

Those of us who have lived and studied in the East, however, know well that these education systems, while undoubtedly notable in many ways, have their own problems, just as ours do. For example, various authors have noted various flaws in the Japanese education system, including the inability to instill creativity or critical thinking skills, commonplace rote memorization that breeds conformity or limits foreign language acquisition, and a system of overly harsh discipline that punishes the weak (McVeigh 2002; Schoppa 2002; Yoneyama 2002). Japan and Korea are often lumped together in these discussions because both have a high level of educational standardization and centralized
policy making, but when viewed by a Westerner, at times they might also appear to have rather rigid and violent senior-to-junior hierarchies, blind respect for elders that can make innovation difficult, and bullying that appears downright Darwinian. Clearly, neither country’s education system is perfect.

Hyunjoon Park, associate professor of sociology and education at the University of Pennsylvania, offers his take on these issues in his new book, *Re-evaluating Education in Japan and Korea: Demystifying Stereotypes*. Park’s purpose in writing the book was to critically analyze stereotypes about education in Japan and Korea, especially arguments based on “untested, oversimplified and stereotypical assumptions” that had not previously been subjected to “empirical scrutiny” (3). Much previous literature, he claims, regards the negative effects of educational standardization in these nations, so his aim was to offer a “more balanced look at the complicated nature of academic achievement among Japanese and Korean students” (6). Following the work of Takehiko Kariya (2012), among others, Park aimed to “challenge the stereotypical image that Japanese students suffer from the stress and pressure of exams and too many study hours, by presenting counterevidence that the Japanese students themselves do not consider competition and preparation for exams as negative experiences” (6).

Park asks and answers four important questions in his book, all of which are based on common stereotypes about East Asian education: First, do standardized education systems make talented students mediocre? Second, do Japanese and Korean education systems fail to produce creative independent thinkers because of an emphasis on rote learning and memorization? Third, are high academic achievers the result of high-quality public schooling or a system of “shadow education” that is composed of private cram schools? Finally, are the education systems in these countries homogeneous enough to consider them “systems”?

Park identifies three reasons why such stereotypes about Japanese and Korean education exist: (1) research and public discourse in the West “has failed to catch up with the significant changes in East Asian education during the last two decades” (4); (2) prior studies have looked only at national average scores; and (3) a “lack of appropriate data has prevented the systematic empirical evaluation of arguments for and against the educational approaches in the two East Asian countries” (4).

Park’s methodology in the study is to subject “stereotyped criticisms” of the Japanese and Korean education systems to “systematic empirical validation.” He employs PISA and TIMSS data to examine their validity, but he does not rely only on the national average scores that we read about so often in the papers. Instead, he also looks at the upper and lower ends of the distributions to see how each education system is treating its best and worst students, that is, how each education system is succeeding and failing.
Park’s book starts from a very good premise: that there is, contrary to popular misconception, more diversity within these nations’ education systems than we once believed. He also rightly notes that the effects of recent educational reforms in these nations that have urged differentiated education are “not uniform across students of different ability levels” (118). That is to say, reforms that were driven by those who believed that Japanese and Korean education systems were too rigid or standardized or could not properly cultivate creativity and critical thinking skills actually had the consequence of creating greater disparity between students who generally excel and students who generally do not. These recent reforms, which were misguided, helped high-achieving children to continue to achieve at a high level and underachieving children to continue to remain underachievers, which hardly seems like a good policy outcome.

While Park does acknowledge that the quantitative data he chooses “may not be ideal” (113), his definitions of “empirical analysis” and “empirical scrutiny” seem to imply that only carefully considered quantitative data will do. In fact, there are many first-rate anthropological studies of East Asian education that offer the kind of nuance and “stereotype-busting” the author seems to suggest is lacking from previous studies (see, e.g., Cave 2007; Goodman 1990; Lewis 1995; White 1988). Park says he wanted to use primarily quantitative data to “invalidate critics’ diagnosis of the problems of the highly standardized education systems of Japan and Korea” (129) because these criticisms were based on stereotypes that blinded outsiders from seeing the strong points of the systems. However, he did not wish to apologize for the failures of these systems in doing so; in the book’s final pages, Park acknowledges that some “social-psychological aspects of student life” in Japan and Korea (129) are “undeniable problems,” and he assures readers that he did not intend to ignore these problems by using primarily quantitative data.

Park believes that “stereotyped criticisms” of these education systems have done more than just mislead our views; they have also led to a “troubling turn” in these countries as reforms aimed to cure various imagined education problems ended up producing significant inequalities in educational opportunity and achievement. In Japan, for example, the so-called yutori kyouiku reforms that were implemented after the turn of the century attempted to direct the education system away from standardization and rigor and give students “room to breathe” (Bjork 2010), but Park argues that the data show growing inequalities since their implementation.

Therefore, Park’s implicit, and probably unintentional, suggestion that quantitative analysis ought to be the primary way of conducting empirical research should be considered a minor flaw given his book’s contribution to a variety of fields, including the sociology of education and East Asian studies. But Park should also be praised for reminding us that international compar-
isons depend greatly on what data the researcher sees as worthy of inquiry and comparison, the weight he gives to each factor, what countries he selects, and what assumptions he brings into his study.

Park’s important contribution to our understanding of education in Japan and Korea could not have come at a better time. Cross-national attraction will continue to be an essential area of inquiry for scholars studying education in an era of globalization, and Park’s work reminds us that we must always question the assumptions that have driven previous studies and then subject our own studies to careful empirical scrutiny, whether quantitative or otherwise.

References